

A large colony of King penguins is shown on a beach. The penguins are densely packed, filling the frame. They have black heads and backs with bright yellow-orange bands around their necks and chests. Their beaks are long and pointed. The background shows a sandy beach and the ocean in the distance.

EDEN OF THE ATLANTIC

NICK WALTON BRAVES THE TUMULTUOUS SEAS
AND WICKED WINDS OF THE SOUTH ATLANTIC
TO DISCOVER ONE OF THE WORLD'S MOST
REMARKABLE WILDLIFE DESTINATIONS.



South Georgia is for people who no longer get their kicks from Antarctica. Windswept, wild, and at the mercy of the elements, it's adventure cruising at its best.

"If you were to take a giant carving knife, slice along beneath one of the highest mountain ridges of Switzerland, just where the huge glaciers tumble into the valley below, and then drop your slice of mountain, dripping with sugar-icing, into the sea, I think you would get a fair idea of the place," described acclaimed ornithologist Niall Rankin in 1946.

Inhospitable, remote, and subsequently rarely visited (even compared to Antarctica which is 1,000km further south), South Georgia is a crucial lifeboat for the many ocean species that require solid ground to breed and rear their young. Over two million king penguins call the island their summer home and they're joined by hundreds of thousands of elephant and fur seals, and countless sea birds. Think of it as a frozen Galapagos on steroids.

It's a destination coveted by wildlife photographers and I'm

one of 90 passengers on board the *Akademik Sergey Vavilov* expedition ship en route from the Falkland Islands to South Georgia for a Photographic Symposium organised by Canadian polar specialists OneOcean. It becomes apparent before we reach our destination that something has gone wrong.

On cruise ships, rumours have a habit of spreading like wildfire, so by the time my fellow guests and I assemble in the bar lounge most passengers have a sense that our 15-day voyage in the South Atlantic has gotten off to a rocky start. Seasoned expedition leader Boris Wise confirms the details; one of the ship's two propellers isn't behaving as it should, an issue that was only discovered after we departed Stanley, the capital of the Falkland Islands. He explains, in his charming, calming Canadian way, that this will reduce our speed by 30 per cent and throw our plans to circumnavigate South Georgia into disarray.

I'm not particularly fussed. This is the nature of expedition cruising and it's all just part of the adventure. However, it's

indicative of how unique South Georgia is as a destination, and how sought-after it has become among a strapping breed of silver-haired, would-be adventurers, that some passengers — namely two British lawyers, who we promptly nickname the 'Walrus' and the 'Badger' — are a little put out. The Walrus is affronted by the mechanical fault and bellows conspiracy theories while trying to rally support from a company of somnolent Swedes. The Badger mumbles about his misfortune as it's the second time he will miss important landings after a previous cruise was affected by severe weather. Boris takes their concerns on board and promises us his best efforts as we steam south into the night.

The slight disruption to our itinerary does little to dull my enthusiasm as we putter along through towering swells over the next few days. We select wet weather gear, learn how to board the ship's zodiacs and attend lectures by resident photographers and naturalists on South Georgia's unique ecosystems. The Walrus and the Badger join the other keen shooters who prowl the decks with ice-flecked whiskers and long lenses, hoping to

snap pictures of the dexterous storm and snow petrels and elusive wandering albatrosses that escort the ship south. The authentic and controversial seal-skin suit the Walrus sports has tongues wagging across the ship.

Moods are lifted with the first sight of land - the Shag Rocks - jagged shards of ancient mountaintop upon which great waves heave themselves with a roar that can be heard kilometres away. By morning we've arrived in the relative shelter of King Haakon Bay, a deep-set cove wreathed by glaciers on South Georgia's northwest flank made famous by Sir Ernest Shackleton, who landed here in 1916 after escaping the ice during his ill-fated Imperial Trans-Antarctic Expedition. It's a breathtaking first glimpse of South Georgia, with towering peaks playing hide-and-seek among silver clouds, and grey petrels swooping low over a frozen beach populated by snorting, grumbling Southern elephant seals.

Of all the remarkable wildlife that seduces travellers so far south, these huge seals are a massive drawcard. Mothers nurse

their new arrivals, jet black, baying woolly little pups with huge glassy eyes, while their fathers jealously guard their harems against potential Lotharios. Life as a male elephant seal isn't easy; male bulls – or 'beachmasters' – can weigh in at four tonnes and each patrols a spot on the beach the size of a studio apartment. During summer, when the beach is packed with elephant seals, young males must run a gauntlet of territorial males. Fights often erupt with a symphony of deep roars that ricochet off the cliffs, accompanied by great plumes of steam as males slam into each other like staggering drunks and cling to flesh with their few sharp teeth.

Things in the engine room haven't improved, and that night Boris makes the bold decision to flip the itinerary on its head so that we travel counter-clockwise around South Georgia, to avoid the strong winds coming in from the east and make the most of the time we have left. Boris' move pays off and after enjoying a calm night cruising in the lee of the island, we arrive at Gold Harbour (named for the 'fool's gold' or iron pyrites found here), on South Georgia's southeastern tip. The sun struggles to penetrate thick cloud cover and cast light on a landscape of high cliffs tumbling down to hills of Arctic heather and a wide, open beach.

We hear (and smell) the king penguins well before we can spot any of them. The colony stretches far down the beach, literally tens of thousands of birds, those still in their winter down resembling furry rugby balls, the rest resplendent in their yellow-accented tuxedos. They huddle together, a cacophony of sound as they gossip en masse.

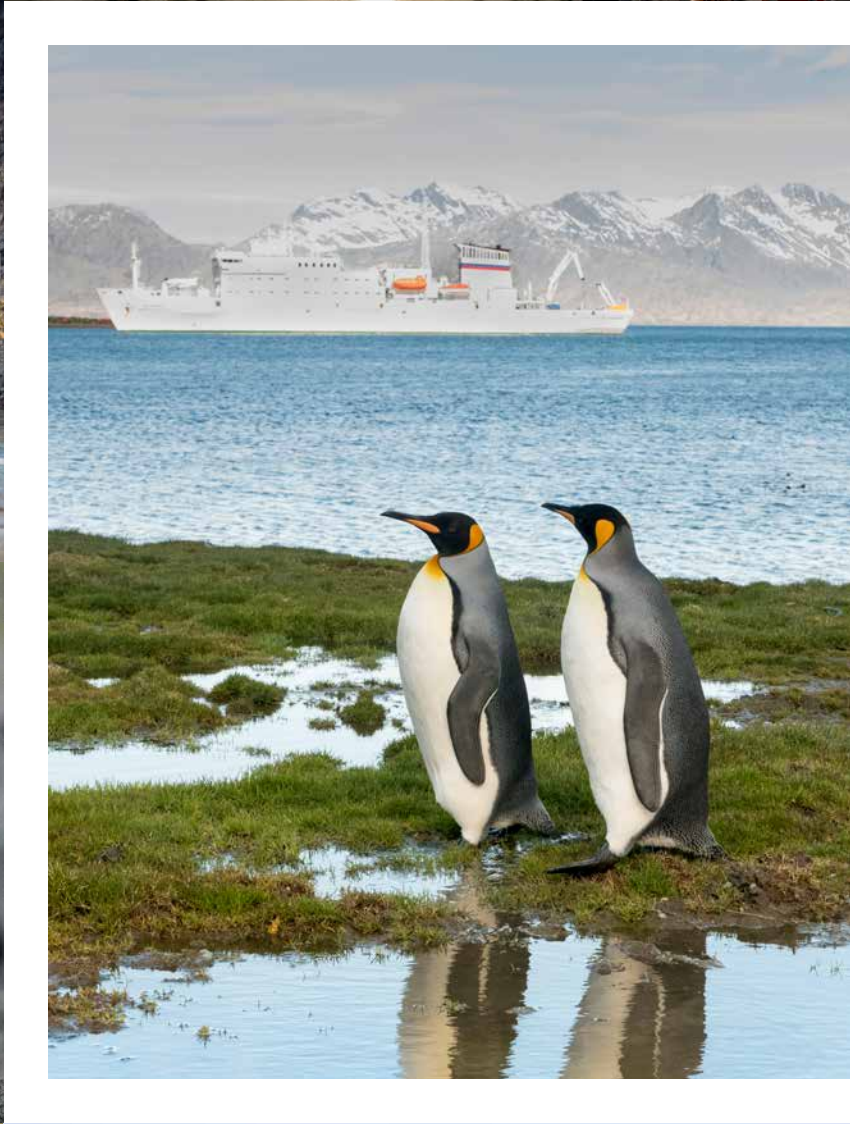
They're not alone. More elephant seals wallow in the surf line or roar and joust on the beach; a sleek leopard seal patrols offshore; shy but feisty fur seals hide in the emerald tussock of the dunes; opportunistic brown skuas glide just above the penguin colony, looking for weak chicks; and stealth bomber-like white-chinned petrels soar effortlessly on the sea breeze that whips across this enthralling landscape. With guidance from the ship's naturalists, we gently approach the penguin chicks, who are patiently waiting for their parents to return after months feeding in the Atlantic. The adorable little furballs are more inquisitive than cautious and I'm soon surrounded by chirping, singing penguins hoping I might have a spare mackerel in my backpack. That afternoon, when the sun finally bullies its way through the canopy, we celebrate the beauty of our destination at Royal Bay, sailing along the base of the spectacular Ross Glacier, a towering wall of vivid blue ice that climbs the ancient valley into peaks topped with brilliant snowcaps.

St Andrews is a coveted destination for South Georgia-bound travellers and our landing here, on a wide, flat beach backed by low hills, almost brings a smile to the Badger's face. Here, among the 150,000 king penguins of an almost year-round colony, we're guided through the specialist techniques of wildlife photography by Gerhard 'Guts' Swanepoel, a South African naturalist with his own photographic safari business in southern Africa. While many of the 'resident photographers' on board disappear at each landing to fill their own Getty's portfolios, Guts sticks with the group, giving suggestions on alternative compositions, shutter speeds and ISO with infinite patience and humour. He's a saving grace for many guests who had signed up for the trip with hearts set on returning home with their own images of this majestic landscape.

Empore por autati
recepudis rae. Accatur
re nonem ex por autati
recepudis rae. Accatur
re nonem excerro
Empore por autati
recepudis rae. Accatur
re nonem ex por autati
recepudis rae. Accatur
re nonem excerro



Empore por autati
recepudis rae. Accatur
re nonem ex por autati
recepudis rae. Accatur
re nonem excerro
Empore por autati
recepudis rae. Accatur
re nonem ex por autati
recepudis rae. Accatur
re nonem excerro



That afternoon there's time to delve into man's often destructive role on South Georgia. While the island is now fiercely protected, it wasn't long after South Georgia's discovery that sealers and whalers arrived from Europe, killing a total of 175,250 whales at stations like Grytviken, the rusted remains of which lie at the end of a deep inlet. Here, we pause for a moment to toast the bravery and resolution of 'The Boss', Sir Ernest Shackleton, at his final resting place overlooking the bay. We meet some scientists from the nearby British Antarctic Survey base, the only people to live on South Georgia, to explore the hulking hulls of whaling ships and the beautifully-preserved egg yolk-yellow Whalers' Church.

The ship's many avid birders have their moment one chilly morning at Prion Island, a lonely, weather-whipped rock in the Bay of Isles that's a rat-free sanctuary for albatrosses. Special permission is required to visit this vital reserve and we're rewarded with spectacular displays of aerial acrobatics as black-browed, grey-headed and light-mantled albatrosses join giant, storm and cape petrels in soaring over the undulating landscape at breathtaking speed. A 'waddle' of Gentoo penguins watches, seemingly amused, as the Walrus lies on the beach in his seal suit to get a photo. Many of us are half expecting an opportunistic orca to mistake him for an easy breakfast.



Empore por autati recepudis rae. Accatur re nonem ex por autati recepudis rae. Accatur re nonem exerro

Despite the mechanical issues, we've managed to land at all of South Georgia's top destinations, a miracle in itself. To top of the trip, Boris has left possibly the best for last and we arrive at Salisbury Plain in the afternoon, amber light bathing this vast penguin rookery in gold. It's a spectacular last glimpse of the island, a vast plain populated by 60,000 king penguin chicks, snow-covered Pyramid Peak towering over the bay behind, and I rest my camera gear beside a trio of inquisitive rug rats to soak up this unforgettable sight before the four-day crossing back to civilisation.

Chances are, if the propeller hadn't malfunctioned, the high winds and foul weather earlier in the week would have made landing at many of the east coast sites impossible. So I raise my thermos and toast Mother Nature, OneOcean's expert crew, the blissful unpredictability of travel in the world's farthest flung corners and of course, the Walrus and the Badger. **W**

TRAVEL ESSENTIALS: OneOcean's next South Georgia in-depth Photography Symposium is November 7 - 21, 2019 aboard the line's new *RCGS Resolute*, from US\$13,195 per person, twin share. www.oneoceanexpeditions.com

